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ABSTRACT

This survey of the state-of-the-art of research in international relations suggests that principles of sound argumentation can apply to major decisions in foreign policy. An analysis and critique of policy arguments regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis, the China-Korea-Vietnam embroilment, and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with mainland China are presented to point out the significance of value premises and the disregard for cogency and rationality in foreign policy decision making. (AEA)

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THE CRITICISM OF FOREIGN POLICY ARGUMENT

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My assignment could not have come at a better time. A few days before I began to construct this state-of-the-art paper on foreign policy deliberations, the Spring issue of International Studies Notes arrived, containing a new feature: a "Research in Progress" section. Therein Norman D. Palmer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, and a prestigious analyst of foreign policy decisions for half a century, surveys the state of International Relations (IR) research. I exaggerate not at all when I claim that he wrote my prolegomenon for me. Everything he has to say about international relations applies to criticism of foreign policy argument in spades. Attend:

1. After more than half a century of debate, there is still no agreement whether International Relations is a separate discipline, although it is widely regarded as a legitimate field of inquiry.
2. Even if it is accepted as a field of inquiry, there is little agreement regarding its nature or content.
3. Although innumerable theories of IR have been advanced, few, if any, have been generally accepted, even fewer have been well developed, and all attempts at developing a general theory or theories have been largely abortive. . . .
5. The study of IR is further handicapped by the fuzziness of the basic concepts that are used, and by the imprecision of, and lack of agreement regarding its terminology.
6. Still another handicap is the changing nature and the general uncontrollability of the "laboratory" in which IR scholars must work - which is the "real world" or the international system and its subsystems. . . .
9. There are many unresolved "great debates" in the field of IR, such as those between "realism" and "idealism," between "radicalism" and "conservatism," between "traditional" and "scientific" methods of research, between "normative" and "empirical" approaches.
10. There is still basic disagreement on the nature and role of values. . . .
11. However objective IR scholars try to be, they still tend to be ethnocentric and "culture-bound." They often reveal distinct cultural or ideological biases. . . .
13. If, as Karl Deutsch has written, "the study of international relations in our time is an introduction to the art and science of the survival of mankind," few IR scholars are either ready or willing to meet the fundamental challenge and obligation of their profession.¹

¹ Norman D. Palmer, "Some Continuing Problems in International Relations Research," International Studies Notes, Spring, 1979, n.p.

I do not believe Palmer's pessimism to be exaggerated. In fact, I believe that were a similarly candid assessment to be made of the state-of-the-art of other so-called social sciences, equally negative conclusions would be reached. If, then, chaos and inadequacy characterize the study of international relations generally, as they do, and if U.S. foreign policy as a subsystem of international relations suffers the same maladies, why mess with it at all? Why not study Zen, or raise flowers, or go into law and make money?

One answer - and a powerful answer - is to be found in Palmer's last contention, which incorporates a quote from Karl Deutsch. The nuclear-fueled anarchy of great power conflicts does threaten the "survival of mankind." Foreign policy may seem remote from the mountains of Utah, as indeed it once was. But we are now only minutes away from the missile silos of Wyoming; and no one knows how far away from the incident which can trigger Armageddon. We study foreign policy because we hope to increase the chances of survival.

But where do we begin, what areas of foreign policy should we study? We are confronted with a bewildering array of possibilities. And wherever we start, the heavy influence of past events leads us backward to antecedents and precedents, or the probable consequences of present events lead us forward to endless repercussions.

One plausible starting point can be obtained by asking, "What event has placed mankind closest to the holocaust?" The answer is "The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962." Here was a conflict so dangerous that Kennedy himself estimated the chances of nuclear war to be as great as 50-50. The Cuban Missile Crisis offers magnificent opportunities for the student of argument. We know much about the background of the conflict, about the operational codes and vested interests

of the decision makers, about the hour-to-hour unfolding of events, about the arguments offered to support alternative courses of action, and about which arguments were ultimately persuasive. The literature is rich, provocative, and available to all.² While the Missile Crisis is embedded in the whole complex history of Soviet-American and U.S.-Latin American relations, the action came within a limited period, and it can be studied as a relatively self-contained unit.

Equally significant, but less widely is the syndrome of crises beginning with the fall of Nationalist China, leading through the Korean War and the Quemoy incidents, culminating in Vietnam. It is often forgotten that Eisenhower threatened the use of nuclear weapons in Korea, and that various American military-political figures, including a candidate for the Vice-Presidency, argued for their use in Vietnam. The long-term consequences of the China-Korea-Vietnam embroilment have been more traumatic for this country than even the Missile Crisis. The literature here is more diffuse and less focused; Asia is a quagmire in which argument analysts can easily become bogged down. But the dramatis personae of our Asian adventures are as colorful as any set of decision makers are likely to be: Vinegar Joe Stilwell, Claire Chennault, Douglas MacArthur, Harry Truman, Joseph McCarthy, John Foster Dulles, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger. How they argued and reached decisions, and with what integrity, has to be of interest even to jaded undergraduates.

² One can conduct a solid study of the Missile Crisis, and get a satisfactory dose of theory to boot, with only four books: (1) Elie Abel, The Missiles of October. (2) Graham Allison, Essence of Decision. (3) Irving Janis, Victims of Groupthink. (4) Herbert Dinerstein, The Making of a Missile Crisis. This progression takes one from a competent journalistic chronology, through a sycophantish and wrong-headed academic treatise, then an overblown bit of "scientific" psychology, ending with a marvelous Kremlinological analysis.

There is, of course, the possibility of plunging directly into the foreign policy arguments occupying today's headlines. How should we evaluate the arguments for and against SALT II? What should we believe about the new government of Rhodesia? How cogent are the arguments for U.S. support of the Israeli-Egyptian peace? Should we carry through the controversial Panama Canal Pacts? All of these tortured controversies can lay claim to our attention.

Or, if one is more historically minded, there are at least two seminal decisions farther back in time, both of which powerfully influenced the shape of the modern world, both of which were cliff-hangers for the American nation: Wilson's decision to invade the Soviet Union, and the Senate's decision to keep the United States out of the League of Nations. In retrospect, both these decisions seem moronic and incredible. Is it too much to expect that a study of the arguments which led to them would enlighten us in our present trials?

* * *

How can one analyze and critique foreign policy arguments? Texts on argument are rather thin on this point. One of the complaints Palmer articulates about the study of international relations applies with particular force to argument theory: everybody is uneasy about the nature and role of values.

The brethren in international studies, like their compatriots in political science, sociology, and even economics, have tended to try to develop a value-free "science" which will, in mimicry of B.F. Skinner, finesse the raging problems of human goals and aspirations. Usually this approach assumes agreement on some form of census-taking as providing sufficient guidance in the development of policy. As David Braybrooke explained it to me just as the Vietnam War was heating up, in 1965, we could know what policy to follow in that tortured land

by applying scientific survey techniques to find out what the natives want. When we find out, we give it to them.³ I hope I need not, before this audience, criticize that analysis. It is, of course, a reductio ad absurdum of the value-free ambition in social science. But it is Braybrooke's reductio not mine, and it is not really all that far removed from the claims of those who tout systems analysis as the ultimate technique of decision makers. From where I stand, the discussion and criticism of values lies at the heart of every foreign policy argument. Where values are not made explicit and raised to the level of consciousness, deliberation is apt to go astray.

It is precisely by way of articulating and criticising values that the most trenchant criticism of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam has come. The hawks who nurtured that war, probably without exception, presupposed the sanctity of American commitments to aid nations threatened by Communist invasion or subversion. The argument offered countless times in the early nineteensixties for an escalation of our role in Vietnam, when fully spelled out, looks like this:

Goal or value-statement: The U.S. should fulfill its commitment to the Vietnamese.

Position re this goal: We are not now fulfilling our commitment to the Vietnamese since we are not fully engaged in the war.

Prediction: Full involvement in the war will clearly fulfill our commitment to the Vietnamese.

Therefore the U.S. should get fully involved in the war.

Here, under imprimatur of official rhetoric, was a badly flawed argument. Serious doubt exists about the validity of interventionism in general, but the main flaw was the vagueness of our "commitment" to Vietnam. Johnson, Rusk, Bundy, McNamara, Rostow all talked as if there were a specific, clear and binding promise. But there was none. Gruening and Morse, initially, and Fulbright later, singled out the value premise here and held it up to careful inspection; but for

³ Interview, June 28, 1965. For the full-blown theory which gives rise to such judgments, see David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindblom, A Strategy of Decision. New York, 1963.

most of the body politic, this premise, unexamined, allowed official argument to prevail.

The "fulfill our commitment" argument on Vietnam was at least openly laid out. Not all of the argument in foreign policy decision groups is shared with outsiders. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, one very significant argument was not publicized until long after the event. This argument was apparently never even articulated during the deliberations, though this is not surprising. It has to be reconstructed ^{from} memoirs of the participants, and from a conversation reported in Robert Kennedy's Thirteen Days. President Kennedy had decided on a blockade of Cuba, and the U.S. Navy was in truculent deployment. As Soviet ships approached our blockade, JFK confided to his brother that things looked bad. Robert replied, "'I just don't think there was any choice, . . .'. The President thought for a moment and said, 'That's what I think - I would have been impeached.'" (page 67).

Here we obtain an indication of the unarticulated, possibly even sub-conscious, working of an argument which begins to explain Kennedy's rejection of the whole range of non-forcible alternatives in the Missile Crisis. This argument might be laid out this way:

Goal or value-statement: This Administration must maintain its public support.
 Position re this goal: The public expects firm response to such aggressive moves as missiles in Cuba.
 Prediction: An aggressive response such as a blockade will maintain public support for this Administration.
 Therefore we should establish a blockade of Cuba.

What influence this line of thought had with President Kennedy we can never know. There were, of course, other arguments for a blockade. But as Kennedy himself put it, "The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the

observer - often, indeed, to the decider himself."⁴ From other sources we know that getting reelected was very important to Kennedy. He told some of his close associates that he intended to get out of Vietnam if he were reelected in 1964 - but not before.⁵ He told Theodore White, during the 1960 campaign, that he should apologize to John King Fairbank and Owen Lattimore for having joined the McCarthyites in accusing them of "losing" China - but this had to wait on the appropriate moment politically.⁶ It never came.

So it is entirely possible that the most important argument of all, in the deliberations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, was never put forward at an Ex-Comm meeting simply because it would reveal that the President was putting his personal interests first, rather than the national interest: "I have got to be tough in Cuba or I will be impeached."

How does one judge a value premise ^{such} as "This Administration must retain its public support," when the consequence of accepting such a premise may be nuclear war? Value criticism may be the fuzziest and most unsatisfactory of all scholarly enterprises. As the great Apostle said, we see as through a glass darkly. Nevertheless there are ways in which value premises in policy arguments can be critiqued. First, one can inspect their factual grounding, as in the "commitment" to Vietnam" example. Second, one can test their consistency, a la Kant, and ask "Do we always act on this basis?" And thirdly, one can test their compatibility with other values. Do we really want to maintain military superiority over the Soviet Union, for instance, if that goal is incompatible with a healthy economy, or with a desired level of social services? I offer these approaches to the criticism of value premises not as a complete heuristic,

⁴This quote is carried on the frontispiece of Allison, Essence of Decision.

⁵See Jim F. Heath, Decade of Disillusionment. Bloomington, Indiana, 1975, 162.

⁶White tells part of this story in his memoirs, In Search of History, 470. Additional details came from an interview with Lattimore, March 15, 1977.

but as a starting point. The absolutely vital matter is that all foreign policy argument incorporates value judgments, and one's argument layout must force these judgments into view. One can then, however inadequately, begin to criticize them.

* * *

If an adequate foreign policy argument layout must begin with a value statement, it must close with a prediction. Inherent in any such argument is a claim that taking X action will achieve, or approximate, or move us closer to the goal or value upon which the argument is based. This is not just a matter of definition. The necessity for anticipating the outcome of proposed policies has long been acknowledged in economics, however impotent economists are in aligning their predictions with the world of events. Political scientists recognize that the bottom line of political argument is always a projection of some policy into the future. So much is simple common sense. If one asks, "Why should we ratify the SALT II agreements?" some part of the answer has to be a statement of this sort: "Because they will slow down the arms race."

In the great foreign policy debates of this century, one argument of global consequence, which had impeccable credentials, centered on a prediction which came true. Had this argument been accepted by decision makers in Washington, the history of the last thirty-five years would have been quite different, and the massive Vietnam trauma which racked this country a decade ago might have been avoided. The argument was made by responsible journalists, by prominent military figures, and by some of the most perceptive foreign service officers this country has ever produced - yet it failed. The argument, offered during the period 1943 to 1949, was simply this:

Goal or value-statement: The U.S. should maintain contact with the future rulers of China.

Position re this goal: The U.S. now maintains contact only with the Kuomintang Government.

Prediction: The Communists under Mao will probably take control of China. Therefore, we should establish significant contact with the Chinese Communists in Yenan.

This argument was made by Edgar Snow, and Theodore White, and Annalee Jacoby. Stilwell subscribed to it, and Col. Evans Carlson. John Paton Davies, Ray Ludden, and John Stewart Service made the argument in their official dispatches after serving with the Dixie Mission. Davies authored the most pithy formulation, which became, later in the McCarthy Years, notorious; in a dispatch of November 7, 1944, he said, "The Communists are in China to stay. And China's destiny is not Chiang's but theirs."⁷

When the terror was in full flood, the McCarthyites claimed that this was a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that American refusal to completely underwrite Chiang caused his downfall. There is not one shred of evidence to support this contention. The Nationalist Government fell of its own venality and incompetence. It lost the mandate of heaven years before its final demise, and no force on earth could have preserved it.⁸

Losing arguments, as well as winning arguments, deserve our attention. Aristotle was surely wrong in claiming that truth and justice are more powerful than their opposites, so that if a truthful argument fails, those who used it are to blame. History is full of instances where bad arguments drove out good, where the paranoid style of argument overcame reason, where malicious men and corrupt institutions triumphed over the true and the virtuous. I do not practice, nor promote, the analysis of foreign policy argument in the belief that any scholar can produce an enlightened polity which will make consistently good decisions. For one thing, Henry Kissinger is still at large, and neither Garry Trudeau nor William Shawcross is likely to counterbalance his meretricious influence.

⁷ China White Paper, 573.

⁸ See John F. Melby, The Mandate of Heaven: Record of a Civil War, China 1945-49.

Failure, in fact, is the lot of most cogent arguments about foreign policy. I can claim to have been at the vortex of one of the most magnificent failing arguments of the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The magnitude of this failure can be measured by the fact that now for the first time, eighteen years after the event, am I able to confront the failure publicly and head-on. In 1954, when the college debate topic was recognition of Communist China, I was among those debate coaches attacked by the Hearst press for subverting the youth. This topic was not debatable; to even suggest that we should have dealings with the devils in Peking was treasonable. The debate fraternity was profoundly shocked by this attack. I reacted by constructing, between 1955 and 1961, a full-scale analysis of all the arguments on recognition of Communist China, for and against, which analysis Macmillan published in the Fall of 1961.

I do not claim that this analysis was flawless. I misevaluated the Chinese takeover of Tibet, for instance, accepting the faulty conclusions of the International Commission of Jurists. I did not appreciate the depth of either Great Russian or Chinese chauvinism, and hence failed to realize the intensity and durability of Sino-Soviet conflict. But worst of all, I did not realize that the power of the China lobby, the hammerlock put on China policy by McCarthy and his allies, the fear within the Democratic Party of damage such as was sustained by Truman due to the "loss" of China had all made my careful analysis of the question irrelevant.

Recognition of Communist China: A Study in Argument fell from the press stillborn. It came to all the right conclusions - a decade before the country was ready for them. It received flattering endorsement in journalistic and intellectual circles - a third page encomium in the Times Book Review section, favorable treatment in Saturday Review, even considerable praise in the dour American Political Science Review. Nobody attacked it. Bill Buckley's National

Review, which carried a hostile two-paragraph pre-publication notice, chose to remain silent thereafter. It sold 20,000 copies, was read in the Kennedy State Department, and then totally ignored.

How more traumatic could the reception of a major analysis of foreign policy argument be? What clearer warning could one have that the world is not governed by rational argument, but by crude popular passions and blind self-interest? Norman Palmer's jeremiad about the state-of-the-art of International Relations in 1979 is mild compared to the situation which prevailed at the end of the nineteen-fifties: McCarran carried on for McCarthy, Jenner went Knowland one better, Dulles pranced on the brink of the Netherworld, to be succeeded by Dean Rusk, whose rigidity on Asian policy was second to none. Change came, the policy I so assiduously showed was correct, only when Richard Nixon, one of the original creators of estrangement, found that he needed a foreign policy spectacular to assure his 1972 election.

Nor was I alone in finding my rational masterpiece spurned in the corridors of power. One of the most impressive analyses of Soviet-American relations ever produced, authored by the originator of the doctrine of containment, a former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Director of the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State, none other than George F. Kennan, came out in 1958. Kennan's study showed brilliantly that we should disengage from the Soviets in Central Europe; while his argument aroused much controversy, it ultimately met the same fate as mine. Russia, the Atom, and the West is compelling in its treatment of the Soviet-American confrontation; but the real world is not governed by compelling arguments.

So we are once again back at an earlier question. Why do we bother to make and critique arguments on foreign policy? If the state-of-the-art is as dreary as Norman Palmer says; if the devotion of decision makers to bad arguments

and to demagoguery is as enduring as it appears to be; if one's best efforts are greeted by apathy and rejection, why continue?

Men will argue, on foreign policy and other matters, as long as they inhabit this earth. Just as the unexamined life is not worth living, the unexamined argument is not worth making - or listening to. We criticize, and analyze, because we must. Let us have at it. The specialists in International Relations have hardly preempted the field. Someday, somewhere, someone may listen.